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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

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THE FATE OF BUDDHISTS
(Lecture delivered by Master Sheng-Yen
on Buddha's Birthday, Sunday, May 10, 1987)

There's something to be said for fortune-telling. In fact, I've met some fortune-tellers who were quite talented. Unfortunately, none of them had particularly good fortunes themselves. One who believes his fate is predetermined will not have a happy life. But one who believes in the Dharma and who realizes that his life is not predetermined, can have a very happy life indeed.

Buddhists do not believe in predetermination. The Buddha does not believe in fate. He believes that all things, all phenomena arise from the mind. The important thing is to develop right view according to Buddhadharma, live correctly, and practice diligently. It is by right view, right living, and right practice that we progress. Belief in fate can lead you in circles, but with Buddhadharma you can take each day and start anew.

Today is Buddha's Birthday and it is the beginning of a new life. As Buddhists we believe that we are not controlled by fate; we believe our future depends on what we do now. If we act properly we can turn our fate around.

Many years ago I met someone who tried to predict my future by the day and hour of my birth. He predicted that I would have two wives and three children. Well, I haven't met a wife yet, and I don't expect that I will for the rest of my life.

An old master in Taiwan once heard that there was a blind man who could tell fortunes by feeling one's bones. He would run his hand along his subject's spine, arms and legs and arrive at a prediction. So the old monk decided to try it. The blind fortune teller told him he would have a wonderful life: lots of wives, concubines, and children. The old monk paid him, and left. Later he commented, "This is a blind man speaking blind words."

I can believe in astrology, but I have a greater faith in the Dharma. If you accept the Dharma, then your fate will not manifest in a predictable way. But if you don't live according to the Dharma, then your future can be predicted quite accurately. Your fate will be set. If you heed and practice the Dharma, your life will not be dictated by fate.

In astrology it is understood that the very moment you are born determines what will happen to you throughout your life. Therefore, astrologers in the Orient have used four conditions to interpret one's fate: the year, month, day, and hour of birth. This is how astrologers make a living. Other fortune tellers may use facial features, palms, body shape, bones, and voice to uncover your fate.

When Shakyamuni was born, his parents called in the most famous astrologers in the land. They were regarded almost as deities. They said that the young boy was very special, and that when he grew up, he would either become king of the world, or he would leave home and achieve enlightenment.

If we examine the biographies of outstanding monks, we can see that their births were accompanied by strange and extraordinary events. They either had remarkable personal characteristics, unusual physical features, or strange phenomena occurred when they were born. Even when they were babies, it was known that these men were destined to become great masters.

There is then another question. Do two people born at exactly the same time share exactly the same fate? I'm sure that on the exact day and minute that President Reagan was born many other people were born, too. Does this mean that all of these people are destined to become presidents?

The sutras tell us that before the Buddha was born, many came from other worlds to prepare the people of this world for the coming of Shakyamuni Buddha. There were others who came after his birth specifically to be his disciples so that they could continue the teaching. There were people born at exactly the same time as the Buddha, but only he attained Buddhahood.

Have you ever met someone who was born on exactly the same date and time as you. If you did, you'd find that both of you led completely different lives.

I once met a rich man who was born in the year of the Horse, the same year I was born. He asked me the season and location of my birth. I told him that I was born in the winter in a cold region of China. He said that it was logical that I was poor now: because I was born under such barren conditions, there had been no grass for a poor horse to eat; naturally, I didn't prosper. I'm sure that if I'd been born in a warm area, an astrologer could find an explanation for how I arrived in my present circumstances.

It is true that at the moment of birth a great deal has already been determined, in that we have a particular body which came into being as a consequence of karma created in innumerable past lives. All of this karma converges in us on the day we are born. However, if we have the opportunity to learn Buddhadharma, and we accept and practice it, then our fate can change. Even our facial features will change.

A famous astrologer from Taiwan took the Three Refuges with me. He confided in me that now that he's in the States he feels a little uncomfortable working as an astrologer. He realized that he was practicing an Outer Path, not true Dharma. But I told him that it was all right to be an astrologer, because there are ordinary people who might be helped by his advice.

I asked him if he could predict his own future. He said that he was having some trouble with that. In the past he'd felt that he had been one-hundred percent accurate, but lately he'd been off the mark. Before he accepted the Dharma, he used to get up everyday and chart his fortune. But now he can't see the future very clearly. I asked him if he could look into my future, but he declined.

Avy has a friend who is remarkably talented in reading a crystal ball -- she can see into past lives. But when I asked her to look into my past, she saw nothing. It's a pity that I don't even have a past life.

How many of you would like to know about your previous lives? The sutras say that if you want to know about your past, just look at yourself now. Look at what is happening, what you are encountering, now. This tells you all you need to know about your previous lives. And if you want to know what's in store for you in your future lives, just watch yourself now. What you are doing in the present moment will produce your future.

Anyone having great problems in this life is experiencing these difficulties as a result of what was done in a previous life or lives. If you really knew what it was you did in the past to deserve what is happening to you now, you might not feel that happy about it. The knowledge would be complicated, upsetting, and of little use.

For example, if you knew that your son had been your grandfather in a previous lifetime, how would you treat him -- as a son or a grandfather? If you knew that your wife had been your grandmother, how would you feel?

According to the sutras, in a period of anywhere from a few hundred to a thousand years, we usually have intimate relationships with only a small number of the same people. In each succeeding lifetime the people in this small group interchange roles. Through a long span of time, the circle of people that we interact with grows larger and larger. Family, cousins, friends -- we continue to establish innumerable

relationships such that ninety-nine percent of the people we meet in this lifetime we meet because of our previous karma.

Human beings are strange. Some are born with good looks and substantial intelligence, but have reckless drives or emotions, and consequently they turn favorable conditions into disaster. It might seem a simple matter for such people to control themselves, and indeed, they might agree, but somehow they are incapable of mastering their emotions, and they bring disorder and confusion to their lives and the lives of the people around them. It's like someone walking into a river, aware that he is going to drown, and even though his mind tells him to turn back, he continues on and drowns anyway.

You must learn to control yourself. You must have power over your mind, and you have to meditate. If there is someone you hate, then consider him or her to be a Buddha or a Bodhisattva. You must realize that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can appear in two different forms. They take one form when they help us; another when they appear to oppose us. Helping is the better way for people who lack strength and courage, but opposing is the better way for people who have strong personalities. If you understand Buddhadharma and karmic consequence, then you will be able to turn an unfavorable situation into a favorable one.

How can you change your fate? You must understand that when there is a cause, there is an effect. Actions have consequences. However, before we suffer or benefit from these consequences, there are other conditions that arise, so that the particular characteristics of the consequences can be changed. If we act and speak according to Buddhadharma in this lifetime, we continuously add meritorious and favorable conditions to our karma, so that when our previous karma manifests, what actually happens to us will be changed because of the new conditions that arise from our meritorious behavior. On the other hand, if we act as we please solely out of self-interest and do not accord with the Dharma, we will be just like a boat tossed about on the waves of the ocean -- powerless to determine our own course.

A Buddhist must have great willpower to change his fate. But if we look at things positively and we act towards good ends, we can strengthen our willpower. If we think, speak, and act according to the Dharma, we can gradually bring about a change in our lives.

In Taiwan I have some left-home disciples who are almost impossible to deal with, and I have some lay practitioners who hardly listen to a word I say. You might think that I should kick them out of the temple. But because I am a monk I can't make them leave. I would be depriving them of the opportunity to come in contact with the Dharma. This is something I could never do.

I spoke about some of these people with a friend of mine. He listened and said, "No problem." I asked him to elaborate -- why did he think such difficult people were so easy to deal with? He

said, "If these people are really so disruptive, they are either complete rascals or they are Bodhisattvas. I can't imagine such malcontents becoming monks and nuns, so if they are unruly even as practicing Buddhists, the only conclusion to draw is that they are Bodhisattvas, and they must be here for a very special reason, indeed. So there's no need to be concerned."

Another monk in Taiwan who is also my disciple is a very peculiar person. I bought him a dozen pairs of socks. He wears one pair for a long time, and when they start to smell bad, he takes them off, throws them in a corner, and grabs a new pair. When he goes through the whole dozen, he turns them inside out and starts the cycle again. He never washes any of his socks. I found this very annoying. Again, my friend said, "No problem. This monk must be a great Arhat -- why else would he do it?" Do you know anyone quite as fortunate as I am -- surrounded by great Arhats and Bodhisattvas?

Once a couple came to see me. Each complained of the other's bad habits. I asked them if they considered themselves to be good people. They both said yes, so I told them that it was more than likely that they each had chosen a good person to live with. If they had chosen a bad person, it would reflect poorly on them. So each is a good and virtuous person, living with another good and virtuous person. There's no problem -- they can live together harmoniously.

In a thought we change the way we look at things. With the right point of view you can turn a situation around completely. If you are the prisoner of narrow perspective, you will always be at the mercy of fate. If you act in this way, you will never be free from vexations, and you will continue to have bad relationships with the people you've always had bad relationships with. Unless we change our minds and the way we look at things, we will never escape from an endless succession of predestined situations. If we change how we perceive, then we will not be overcome by what befalls us, and we will not be oppressed by those around us. The world will seem like a Pure Land.

Once a man came to me and told me that he had been sentenced to jail. He asked how he could contend with his punishment. I said, "As a Buddhist, you should try to stay out of jail, but since you must go, you must try to live through it with happiness and joy." He looked at me, and asked, "How am I supposed to be happy in jail?" I told him that I was once in jail, and I loved it. This was from 1961 to 1967 when I was in solitary retreat in the mountains. I was confined to an area of sixty square feet. Prison inmates have more space than that. I know also of a man who wrote a great deal during the time he spent in prison. He was prolific, and he even wrote some books of literary merit. Obviously, he made the best of his time in confinement.

We must understand that what is happening to us in this life is the consequence of things we did in our past lives, and we must try to act according to Buddhadharma to break out of the

cast set by our previous karma. In this fashion we can progress. If we were not able to change our fate, then ordinary sentient beings would not be able to become Buddhas. We produce the future from our own minds. If there is virtue in our thoughts, then our future will be virtuous. If there is evil in our thoughts, then our future will be filled with misfortune. If Buddha is in our minds, then one day we will become Buddhas.

***** NEWS ITEMS *****

Shih-fu gave lectures in Lowell, Mass. and at Harvard University on the weekend of June 6, 1987.

There was a Beginner's Meditation Class in June. Twenty-eight people attended -- the largest class ever.

On June 21 over twenty-four members attended the Annual Membership meeting.

There were eighteen participants on the July retreat. It was the first retreat held at the Center that lasted seven full days.

Shih-fu returned to Taiwan on July 9. Trish Ing accompanied him, and she will be studying in the monastery there.

Professor Li will lecture at the Center on the 2nd and 3rd Sunday of every month.

On Sunday, September 6th, there will be a one-day recitation of Buddha's name for 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Due to renovation work at the new Center, the weekend sittings on the first of every month have been cancelled, but Tuesday and Thursday night sittings will continue.

We hope that people can volunteer their time on Saturdays to help with the renovation. Please contact Guo-Yuen Shih - 592-6593.

PLEASE NOTE: All checks must be made out to The Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture. Thank you for your consideration.

ALL ARE WELCOME

**Ch'an Meditation Center
Institute of Chung-Hwa
Buddhist Culture
90-31 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, N.Y. 11373
(718) 592-6593**

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